



X-Plain™ *Cubital Tunnel*

Reference Summary

Cubital tunnel syndrome is a condition that causes numbness and possibly pain in the forearm and the fourth and fifth fingers. It can also cause weakness in the arm and all the fingers, affecting the use of the hand. Doctors may recommend surgery for people suffering from cubital tunnel syndrome.

If your doctor recommends surgical treatment for your condition, the decision whether or not to have surgery is also yours. This reference summary will help you understand better the benefits and risks of this surgery.



Anatomy

The ulnar nerve, also known

as the “funny bone,” is a big nerve that crosses the elbow on its way to the hand.

The ulnar nerve passes through a tunnel across the elbow.

The roof of the tunnel is a thick ligament. This tunnel is called the cubital tunnel.

Symptoms and Their Causes

When the nerve gets pinched in the cubital tunnel, the syndrome occurs.

Symptoms include numbness and possibly pain in the forearm, starting at the elbow and going all the way down to the fifth and fourth fingers. This may be accompanied by some weakness in the grip, and the muscles that open and close the fingers.

Patients tend to drop objects because of the:

Weakness,
Numbness,
Clumsiness.

The most common reason for cubital tunnel syndrome is the thickening of the ligament.

There may be, however, other reasons for this syndrome.

Other reasons include swelling of the tissues and the bones surrounding the cubital tunnel, as in rheumatoid arthritis.

Fractures in the arm or elbow can affect the nerves resulting in cubital tunnel syndrome.

Diseases such as diabetes can also cause symptoms similar to cubital tunnel syndrome. This occurs when diabetes damages the ulnar nerve directly.



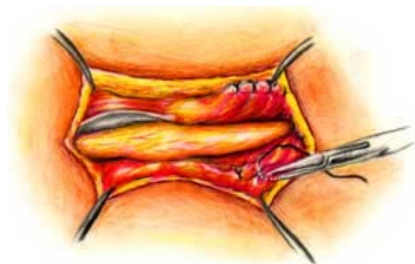
Alternative Treatments

Keeping pressure off the elbow by not laying the elbow down on hard surfaces may help the symptoms.

Keeping the arms straight sometimes helps the symptoms significantly.

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Injection of steroids in the cubital tunnel itself is also a possibility. Splinting and physical therapy may also help. When all else fails, an operation may help.



Surgical Treatment

Operations to treat cubital tunnel syndrome aim at taking the pressure off the nerve. This is called “decompressing the nerve”. When the nerve is decompressed, the pressure on it decreases and the symptoms improve.

The shape of the incision depends on whether the surgeon is moving the nerve or cutting a part of the elbow bone.

The procedure consists of cutting open the ligament and freeing the nerve. This is known as decompressing the nerve.

The nerve is then moved to the front, taking it out of the tunnel and protecting it from further injury. In some procedures, the doctor may remove bone material to enlarge the cubital tunnel. Cubital tunnel release is an outpatient operation where

the patient goes home the same day of the operation.

Risks and Complications

This operation is very safe with good results, especially if done early.

There are, however, several possible risks and complications, which are unlikely, but possible.

You need to know about them just in case they happen. By being informed, you may be able to help your doctor detect complications early.

The risks and complications include those related to anesthesia and those related to any type of surgery.

Risks related to anesthesia include, but are not limited to, heart attacks, strokes, and pneumonia.

These risks will be discussed with you in greater detail by your anesthesiologist.

Some of the risks are seen in any type of surgery. These include:

Infection, deep in the cubital tunnel or at the skin level.

Bleeding.

Skin scar that may be painful or ugly.

Other risks and complications are related specifically to this surgery.

These again are very rare. However, it is important to know about them.

The nerve may be injured resulting in weakness, pa-

ralysis, and loss of feeling in the hand.

The elbow may be damaged causing persistent pain in the elbow area.

There is also the possibility that the operation may not help the symptoms or may even make them worse.

The symptoms may recur.



After the Surgery

Your arm will be bandaged. Your doctor will ask you to keep your arm elevated above the heart level to reduce swelling.

When you shower, you will need to cover the dressing with a plastic bag, making sure the arm stays dry.

Your doctor will tell you how long it will take before you can go back to work. This depends on your age, type of work, and medical condition, as well as other factors.

Your doctor will arrange for a follow-up visit to examine the incision and remove any sutures. He or she will also indicate the hand and arm re-

habilitation program suitable for you.

Summary

Surgery to release the cubital tunnel can help relieve your hand pain and numbness when other non-surgical treatments fail.

This operation is very safe with excellent results. However, as you have learned, complications may happen. Knowing about them will help you detect them early if they happen.

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